

THE
WORLD
AND ALL
THAT
IT **DAMIR
IMAMOVIĆ**
HOLDS

THE WORLD AND ALL THAT IT **DAMIR IMAMOVIĆ** HOLDS

1. **SINOĆ | LAST NIGHT** 5:07
(Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 2. **BEJTURAN | WORMWOOD** 3:14
(Lyrics by Omer Ombašić – Music arr. by Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 3. **ANDERLETO** 2:24
(Arr. by Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 4. **TEŠKO JE LJUBIT TAJNO | IT'S HARD TO LOVE IN SECRET** 4:33
(Lyrics by Damir Imamović – Music arr. by Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 5. **KAD JA PODEM DRAGA | WHEN I LEAVE, MY DEAR** 3:12
(Arr. by Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 6. **HARMONIKO | ACCORDION** 3:40
(Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 7. **OSMANE** 4:53
(Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 8. **MADRE MIJA SI MI MUERO | MOTHER, IF I DIE** 2:46
(Arr. by Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 9. **SNIJEG PADE | THE SNOW HAS FALLEN** 4:24
(Arr. by Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 10. **NOČES, NOČES | NIGHTS, NIGHTS** 4:37
(Arr. by Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
 11. **KOLIKO JE ŠIROM SVIJETA | AS VAST AS THE WORLD** 4:53
(Arr. by Damir Imamović/Carthage Music Limited (PRS) administered in the US by Concord Sounds (ASCAP))
- Produced by
JOE BOYD AND ANDREA GOERTLER**

PRODUCERS' NOTE

By Joe Boyd and Andrea Goertler

It wasn't at all obvious that Damir Imamović would become a musician, much less a visionary who would lead an insurgency within the world of Bosnian *sevdah*. Born in 1978 into a famous Sarajevo musical family, the sounds and words of *sevdalinkas* (songs of *sevdah*) surrounded him during his childhood. But he at first resisted the family tradition.

The word *sevdah* comes from the Arabic rendering of the Greek *melan cholos*, which means, literally, “black bile.” The word also made its way into Portuguese (*saudade*) and Turkish (*sevda*) to express longing and love. *Sevdah* has its lyrical roots in South Slavic folk poetry from as far back as the 16th century, which was embraced by the Romantic movement that arrived when Bosnia and Herzegovina became part

of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 19th century. Its musical form emerged in the fin de siècle cafés of Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Travnik, and Mostar where Bosnian musicians blended Eastern influences from the Ottoman Empire with traditional Slavic and European melodies. Similar musical revolutions were taking place in urbanizing cultures the world over, giving birth to Portuguese fado, Argentine tango, and Greek *rembetika*.

Sevdah was hugely popular across the new nation of Yugoslavia during the 1920s and '30s and became a staple of mass entertainment during the Communist period from 1945 to 1990. The legendary Radio Sarajevo—where Damir's grandfather and father regularly performed and recorded—was at the heart of it. The form

risks becoming an unfashionable relic of the Tito era, but during the Bosnian war of 1992–1995, it took on a new and greater meaning, especially for the younger generation.

Over the long months sheltering during the Siege of Sarajevo, Damir picked up the guitar and discovered old songs. After a few years away studying philosophy, a family project to catalog his grandfather's repertoire brought him back to *sevdah*. Damir began performing regularly in 2005 and has been touring ever since, across the Balkans and Europe, and also to the United States, China, and Mexico. He has recorded seven acclaimed albums and his last, *Singer of Tales*, won “Best of Europe” at the Songlines Music Awards and the 2020 Transglobal World Music

Charts. Beneath the bravado of his charismatic performances, Damir has the soul of a researcher and educator. Between engagements, he is constantly digging in archives, interviewing veteran musicians, uncovering lost recordings, conducting workshops, tutoring young singers, and writing; his book *Sevdah* is the only one in English on the subject.

We met Damir on a brief visit to Sarajevo in 2014 and were instantly enthralled by his singing and his playing—and by *sevdah*. Over the years that followed, we became his friends and, eventually his producers and witnesses to his boundless creativity and tireless quest to bring *sevdah* to new audiences.

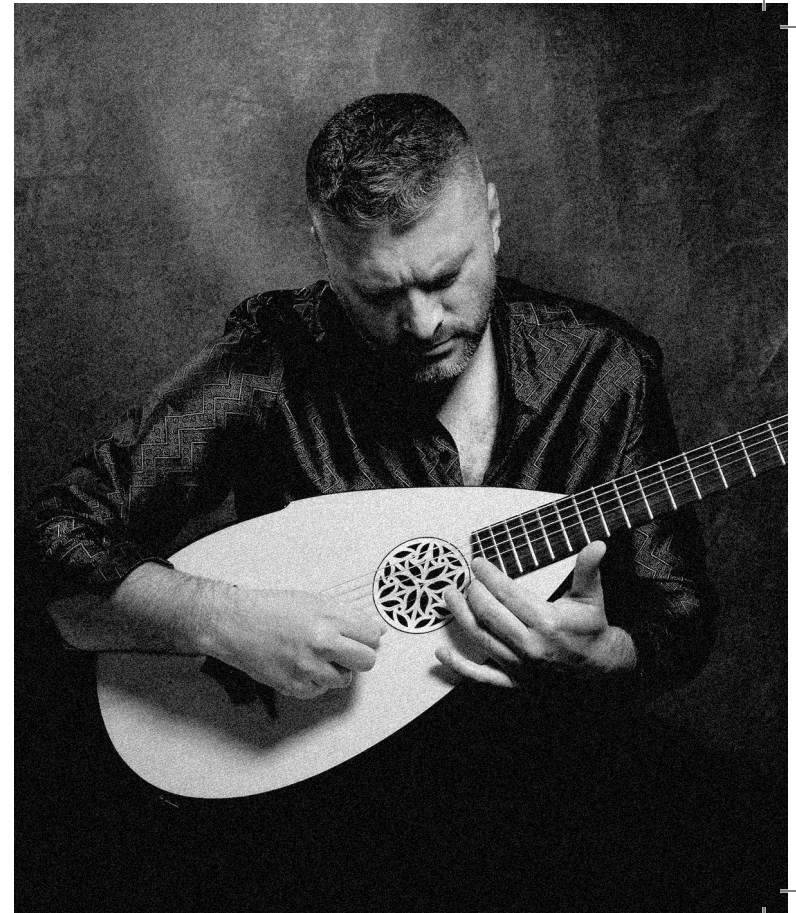
This new project was intriguing from the start: the soundtrack album for a book! With original compositions, old Sephardic songs, and reimagined *sevdah* classics, Damir has created a companion-piece to his friend and fellow Bosnian Aleksandar Hemon's brilliant and heartrending novel, *The World and All That It Holds* (2023). The album had to be recorded in Sarajevo, where the story begins with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand that changed world history. The ensuing Great War propels the two main characters far from their home, and it is through song they express their longing for home and for each other.

Damir shares our belief in recording live in the studio and we are constantly amazed by the energy and joy he brings to each

session. For this recording he reunited with his great pan-Balkan band: Ivan Mihajlović on bass, Nenad Kovačić on percussion, and Ivana Đurić on violin all bring their various musical influences, while guest musician Mustafa Šantić, of Mostar Sevdah Reunion fame, adds some "golden era" glow on accordion and clarinet.

Every great musical form would be fortunate to have a champion such as Damir Imamović, a tireless innovator who continues to find original ways to connect *sevdah's* rich past with an expanding and invigorated future.

PHOTO BY ALMIN ZRNO



MY SEVDAH JOURNEY

By Damir Imamović

My *sevdah* adventure has always been a conversation with my childhood self. I grew up in the 1980s in Sarajevo, during the golden era of Yugoslavia, surrounded by music. My grandfather Zaim was a *sevdah* divinity and his presence was a constant in my early life. Once a legendary radio singer, he was already an old man when I was becoming aware of the world around me. However, he never taught me music. I was enchanted by the martial arts and he helped me build Japanese katana swords out of wood. Only later did I realize that through those carpentry lessons he instilled in me a love of order that was a hallmark of his musicianship. My father Nedžad was a bass player in the legendary Radio Sarajevo Folk Orchestra and a singer. He was a very sought-after session player and I always had a feeling he was the happiest

as a sideman, being everyone's friend. My older brother Nedim frequently subbed for my father and was the one who taught me my first guitar chords. His record collection educated me more than anything else: I dug into John McLaughlin, Zakir Hussain, Eric Clapton, Deep Purple, Frank Zappa, and more. But my earliest contact with music came from family gatherings and my father's "café society" gigs. There, I learned basic keyboard fingerings from legendary accordionist Milorad Todorović and, sitting at the musicians' table, I listened to the violin grandmaster Miki Petrović. I was indeed a privileged child of *sevdah*.

Then the war struck and we found ourselves sheltering at the pizza joint in the basement of our building. This was to become my family's shelter for most of the 1,425 days of

the Serb Siege of Sarajevo. The war broke friendships, families, whole communities, and it cut me off from my childhood. I endured it all playing my guitar and reading a lot. The love of reading prevailed and I ran away from my family's history to study philosophy.

It was only in my mid-20s that I returned to music. My father asked me to edit my grandfather's songbook and I took on that mission together with my friend Farah Tahirbegović. She used to sing in a *sevdah* band and had a lot more experience editing books. Our time researching became an intense journey through the history of *sevdah* and through my childhood. Many of the people I remembered from family gatherings reappeared as giants of the genre and the songs I carried from my childhood

obtained a new meaning and beauty. But something else happened. With Farah, I started dreaming of a new *sevdah*, one rooted in the music's past but challenging the ways things were traditionally done. The postwar Sarajevo of the early 2000s was a vibrant cultural setting in which we dreamed of finding something positive and creative in our cultural identity. The inspiration came in large part from literature. Together, we read the short stories of Aleksandar Hemon, a Bosnian author living in America and writing in English. His work was dedicated to reframing the historical events by finding something new and surprising in the all-too-familiar setting. Maybe because of those influences, our research sessions were never a blind admiration of the past. They would usually end up with us singing together, harmonizing the old tunes and Farah ranting

against prevailing conservatism in public perception of the genre. She saw me drawn into the music and once proclaimed, as if prophesying: “You have to sing *sevdah!*” “And change things!” I added, not jokingly.

That was when I started searching for old masters and learning from them. I was aware that any change had to start from deep knowledge of tradition. Over the years, I met and interviewed more than 100 singers, musicians, *sevdah* connoisseurs, researchers, archivists, and others. On this journey, I found my most important teachers in singers and instrumentalists such as Emina Zečaj, Hašim Muharemović, Ćamil Metiljević, Spaso Berak, and my father. My friend, historian Edin Hajdarpašić, opened up the world of archives for me

and I dove deep into the unknown history of Bosnian music and culture. A few years into that process, I played my first concert and never looked back.

It has been almost 20 years since then and I’ve travelled across the world with my music. Recently, I started to get interested in the music of the Sephardic Jews of Sarajevo for its close connection with *sevdah*. It was precisely at that time that I got a call from Aleksandar Hemon. Saša and I had met before and were already friends. I was perhaps too shy to have expressed to him how much his writing had meant to Farah and me in those early days. He told me he was writing a novel in which two Bosnian soldiers in World War I, Pinto (a Sephardic Jew) and Osman (a Muslim), communicate their love for each other by singing *sevdah* and Sephardic

songs and invited me to work with him on the musical side of the story. The perspective of same-sex love in past times, without any prospect and promise, struck me deeply. Unfulfilled and even forbidden love has always been one of the essential themes of *sevdah*.

Both Saša and I believe in the power of song. It can connect you with a person you love, it can reconnect you with your former self, your childhood, and a home that is no more. Could it help us build a bridge between two separate art forms: an album and a book? The idea of creating this imaginary world with Saša and to have my new album emerge from this collaboration was enthralling. After reading his first chapters, I tracked down old and forgotten versions of traditional *sevdah* and Sephardic

songs that play a central role in Saša’s plot. I suggested a few more, wrote new tunes that he wove into the story. The only song on the album unrelated to the novel’s story is “Harmoniko,” a song that I have been writing for a long time in memory of Farah and her untimely death in 2006.

I feel that an important circle closes with this cooperation—my childhood, my father who died in 2020 while we were working on this album, the memory of my grandfather, my friendship with Farah, and our discovery of the *sevdah* tradition with its power to set us free. That is my world, my *sevdah* and all that it holds.



Nenad Kovačić, Ivan Mihajlović,
Damir Imamović and Ivana Đurić
in concert
PHOTO BY RADE MARKOVIĆ

1. SINOĆ | LAST NIGHT

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tar*; Ivana Đurić, violin; Ivan Mihajlović, bass; Nenad Kovačić, percussion

*Sinoć mi se jedna javi tuga
Što sa tobom ja izgubih druga
Javi mi se pa me mori
Nema nikog da me razgovori*

*I jutros je pod jastukom bila
Kao da je sinoć gnijezdo svila
Javi mi se pa me mori
Nema tebe da me razgovoriš*

*Sutra ću ja ubrat' buket ruža
Pa na tvoja vrata rano doći
Javi mi se jer to što čutiš
To su od mog srca nepreboli*

Last night a sorrow called on me
For I lost you as a friend
It calls on me to torment me
There's no one else I could talk to

And this morning it was under my pillow
As if it built its nest there last night
It comes to torment me
You are not here to comfort me

Tomorrow, I'll pick a handful of roses
And come early to your door
Answer me, for I know you can sense
My heart's endless pains

This was one of the first songs I wrote after reading early drafts of Saša's novel. The love story of Pinto and Osman evokes the atmosphere of the early 20th century and Bosnian poetry of the time. My lyrics were inspired by the famous Bosnian Romantic poet Musa Ćazim Ćatić. In the recording of this track, I used a *tar*, an instrument widely played in Central Asia, the region where much of the novel takes place. In Bosnia, a similar long-necked instrument, the *saz*, was historically used to accompany *sevdah* singing.

2. BEJTURAN | WORMWOOD

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tar*; Ivana Đurić, violin; Ivan Mihajlović, bass; Nenad Kovačić, percussion

*Bejturan se uz ružu savija
Haj, vilu ljubi Đerzelez Alija
Vilu ljubi svu noć na konaku
Haj, po mjesecu i mutnu oblaku
Kad je bilo pri kraju konaka
Haj, zakliktala vila iz oblaka
“Niko vako rahat neće biti
Haj, moj Alija, kao što smo ja i ti!”*

The wormwood wraps around the rose
Đerzelez Alija makes love to a fairy
All night, in bed, he makes love to the fairy
By moonlight, or under a dark cloud
When the night was almost over
The fairy cried from the cloud
“No one will ever have as much pleasure
As you and I, Alija, have had!”

Poravne songs, an older singing style that was unadorned and rhythmically free, are at the heart of the traditional *sevdah* repertoire. The 20th century brought fixed rhythms and harmonies and some of the singers' freedom was lost in the process of turning long narrative songs into popular tunes. Omer Ombašić, a Bosnian emigrant poet living in Sweden, wrote these lyrics about a love story between the famous Bosnian epic hero Alija Đerzelez and the fairy who grants him his strength in perfect *poravne* form. He sent it to me without knowing that I was working on a soundtrack for a novel, which prominently features the story of Alija Đerzelez.

3. ANDERLETO

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tar*; Ivan Mihajlović, bass; Nenad Kovačić, backing vocal and percussion

*Anderleto mi Anderleto
Mi kerido e namorado*

*Mas te kero i mas te amo
Ke el Re kon surenado*

*Dos ižikos de ti tengo
I dos del Re ke son kuartro*

*Los del Re tienen kavajos
I los tujos son in mis brazos*

Anderleto, my Anderleto
My dear, my beloved

I want and love you more
Than the king and his kingdom

I have two little sons from you
And two from the king makes four

The king's sons have horses
Your sons are in my arms

Sephardic Jews brought this old folk ballad with them as they fled 15th-century Spain for what was then the Ottoman Empire. Longer versions tell the story of a queen who sits in front of a mirror as she hears someone entering the room. Wrongly assuming it is her lover Anderleto, she welcomes him by singing, only to realize she has just confessed to her king that two of their four sons are not his. I learned this version of the melody from a 1984 recording of Anula Abinun and Berta Kamhi made by ethnomusicologist Ankica Petrović, who generously shared her archive with me.

4. TEŠKO JE LJUBIT TAJNO | IT'S HARD TO LOVE IN SECRET

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tambur*; Ivana Đurić, violin

*Teško je ljubiti tajno
Kad to ne smije biti javno
Kad to ne smije niko znati
Samo, dušo, ja i ti*

*Dobro znadeš to se vidi
Kad se srce srcu sviđa
Kad se srce srcu nađe
Kao, dušo, ja i ti*

*Eh, da mi je reći majci
Sreću sa njom podijeliti
Hajde, dušo, reci i ti
Jer mi ćemo pobijediti*

It's hard to love in secret
When it must not be for all to see
When nobody must ever know
Except for you and me, my dear

You know everyone can see
When a heart is dear to another heart
When a heart finds a heart
As you and I have, my dear

Ah, I wish I could still tell my mother
Share my happiness with her
Come, dear, you tell yours
For together we will win

This song from Vojvodina, Serbia, is also sung in Bosnia as part of the *sevdah* repertoire by great singers such as Zehra Deović. Traditionally, it opens as an ode to hidden love, a theme common to many *sevdah* tunes, but in the second and third verses it loses this thought. Inspired by the story of Pinto and Osman, I rewrote the last two verses to make it a hymn of secret lovers who eventually triumph.

5. KAD JA POĐEM DRAGA | WHEN I LEAVE, MY DEAR

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tambur*; Ivana Đurić, violin; Ivan Mihajlović, bass; Nenad Kovačić, percussion

*Kad ja pođem draga iz Saraj'va grada
Ti ne plači draga,
ne daj srcu jada*

When I leave Sarajevo, my dear
Do not cry, my dear
Do not let sorrow into your heart

*Ako čuješ draga da sam poginuo
Kroz ordiju prođi na mezar
mi dođi*

If you hear, my dear, that I was killed
Make your way through the soldiers
Come to my grave

*Kako ću ti dragi ja mezar poznati
Lako ćeš mi draga ti mezar poznati*

How will I, my beloved, recognize your grave
It will be easy, my dear, to recognize my grave

*Na mome mezaru dva zlatna nišana
Na prvom je draga kerana marama
Na drugom je draga burma pozlaćena*

Upon my grave, two golden tombstones
On one of them a silken scarf
On the other a gilded wedding ring

The legend among *sevdah* performers is that Sarajevans sang this song when joining Tito's partisans in their fight against fascism during World War II. The song always reminded me of a scene in the famous 1972 Yugoslav film *Walter Defends Sarajevo* directed by Hajrudin Krvavac, in which people pass through army lines to recover the bodies of relatives murdered by Nazi soldiers in occupied Sarajevo. This song tells a similar story of love and defiance. Even before I discovered Saša had made it a part of Pinto and Osman's longing for Sarajevo, I had toyed with the idea of creating a modern version of the traditional song.

6. HARMONIKO | ACCORDION

Damir Imamović, vocals; Mustafa Šantić, accordion

*Harmoniko, zasviraj na brijegu
Tamo gdje mi, gdje mi radost spava*

Accordion, play on that hill
Where my own joy sleeps

*Harmoniko, po zimi i snijegu
Ne bi li se duša ugrijala*

Accordion, in the winter and the snow
So that you can warm up my soul

*Hej, Radosti, ovdje nema više takvih kao ti
Hej, Radosti, mogli smo još sevdah skupa
pjevati
Ja zamišljam, ti još pravdu ganjaš
Nad Zenicom gdje mi sada spavaš*

Hey, my joy, there's no one like you here
Hey, my joy, together we could've sung
sevdah
I imagine you are still pursuing what is right
Above Zenica, where you are sleeping

*Harmoniko, zasviraj na brijegu
Tamo gdje mi, gdje mi radost spava*

Accordion, play on that hill
Where my own, my own joy sleeps

*Jastuk joj je moja desna ruka
Jorgan joj je komad neba plava*

Her pillow is my right arm
Her cover a patch of the blue sky

At the beginning of my *sevdah* journey stands a friendship with Farah Tahirbegović, a young *sevdah* singer, accordionist and book editor. She was my best friend—"my good *sevdah* angel"—who encouraged me to become a professional musician. We shared a love for old *sevdah* recordings and for Saša's early writings. I think she would be very happy and proud to see me working with him on this album. Farah died when she was only 33 and I have been writing this song for her since then. Her name means joy in Arabic (*radosti* in Bosnian). For this recording, I invited her favorite accordionist, Mustafa Šantić (formerly of Mostar Sevdah Reunion) and we recorded it together in the old style of Radio Sarajevo.

7. OSMANE

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tambur*; Ivana Đurić, violin; Ivan Mihajlović, bass; Nenad Kovačić, percussion

*Osmane, ako umreš mlad
Kopaću te u njedra
Gdje je uvijek hlad*

*Osmane, sakriću ti trag
Mirisaću na tebe da ne
pozna vrag
Da te nema*

*Čovječe, tako si mi drag
Otkud meni bez tebe
Za životom glad*

*Osmane, kad te sahrane
Svaku sreću i radost
Nek' mi zabrane
Kad te nema*

Osmane

*Kad te sahrane
Ako umreš mlad
Sakriću ti trag
Da ne pozna vrag*

Osman, if you die young
I will bury you in my bosom
Where there is always shade

Osman, I will hide your traces
I will smell of you, so the devil
can't see
You are no longer here

My man, you are so dear to me
Without you, where will I find
Any hunger for life

Osman, when you are buried
All my happiness and joy
Should be banished
Since you are no longer here

Osman

When they bury you
If you die young
I will hide your traces
So the devil can't see

This song came to me as an immediate reaction after immersing myself into Osman and Pinto's love story. Their travels, their bringing Sarajevo with them wherever they go, their dreams of returning home—all this resonates in this song. I imagine it as both a love cry and a funeral march.

8. MADRE MIJA, SI MI MUERO | MOTHER, IF I DIE

Damir Imamović, vocals and tambur; Ivan Mihajlović, bass; Nenad Kovačić, backing vocal and percussion

*Madre mija, si mi muero
Hazanim no kero jo
Si non doce mansevikos
Adelantre l'mi aron*

Mother, if I die
I don't want any cantors
But twelve young men instead
Walking before my coffin

*Halva šeker ola
Halva šeker ola*

Halvah and sugar
Halvah and sugar

*Madre mija, si mi muero
Ke me yevan davagar
Ke veyan ke so mučičika
Ke se metan a yorar*

Mother, if I die
Let them carry me around
So they'll see I was a young girl
Then they will cry

*Halva šeker ola
Halva šeker ola*

Halvah and sugar
Halvah and sugar

I was afraid of singing in Ladino at first, not sure about the accents, not sure how much I should imitate speakers of contemporary Spanish. A lot of time passed since Ladino was a language heard in the streets of Sarajevo and I just did not have any reference for it. But then I started listening to old recordings of Sephardic songs from Bosnia, and they were all sung in a heavy Sarajevo accent. I was relieved and thought “I could do that.” This song was famously recorded by Flory Jagoda, a well-known Sephardic singer from Sarajevo. In the novel, it is sung by Pinto, the story's Sephardic character, when he remembers the warmth of his home and the love of his mother.

9. SNIJEG PADE | THE SNOW HAS FALLEN

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tar*; Ivan Mihajlović, bass; Nenad Kovačić, percussion

*Snijeg pade na behar na voće
Neka ljubi ko god koga hoće
A ko neće nek' se ne nameće*

*Da sam sretan k'o što sam nesretan
Pa da dođeš meni u odaje
Da mi sjediš među šilтетima
Baš ko paša među bimbašama
Da ti ljubim tvoja medna usta
Tvoja usta, moja želja pusta*

The snow has fallen upon the bloom,
upon the fruit
Let everybody love whoever they want
And those who don't want should
not impose

If I were lucky as I am unhappy
And you came into my chambers
To lounge among the pillows
Like a pasha among his deputies
I would kiss your honey mouth
Your mouth, my vain desire

This is an emblematic *sevdah* tune celebrating freedom to love. As in many places, arranged marriages were a common occurrence in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, there are many songs about young women and men who dream of choosing for themselves whom they will love and marry. Today we live in a much freer world but there are still fights to be fought. The LGBTIQ+ movement in the Balkans has recently adopted this song as an unofficial anthem, sensing a tremendous power in the words: “Let everybody love whoever they want. And those who don't want should not impose.” I performed it at the first Pride march in Sarajevo in 2019.

10. NOČES, NOČES | NIGHTS, NIGHTS

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tambur*; Ivan Mihajlović, bass; Nenad Kovačić, percussion

Nočes, nočes, buenas nočes
Nočes son d' enamorar

Nights, nights, good nights
Nights are for falling in love

Dando bueltas por la kama
Komo'l peše en la mar

In my bed I am restless
Tossing, turning like a fish in the sea

Tres ermanikas ejas eran
Todas tres en un andar

There were three little sisters
All three equally beautiful

Nočes, nočes, buenas nočes
Nočes son d' enamorar
Nočes, nočes d' enamorar

Nights, nights, good nights
Nights are for falling in love

This version of the well-known Sephardic song was forgotten by Sarajevo's Jewish community. I was lucky to have heard it on a 1960s Deutsche Grammophon recording by Eliezer Abinun (1912–1998), a Sarajevo-born *hazan* who spent most of his life in London. Abinun sung it in an old Ottoman melodic form called *hijaz humayun*. Working on it, I imagined Jewish and Bosnian merchants travelling together to Istanbul and bringing back the tunes of the day.

II. KOLIKO JE ŠIROM SVIJETA | AS VAST AS THE WORLD

Damir Imamović, vocals and *tambur*; Mustafa Šantić, clarinet

*Koliko je širom svijeta
Što ga žarko sunce sja
Nema većeg siročeta
Nego što sam ost'o ja*

*Oca nemam, majke nemam
Da se, mlađan, požalim
A ni brata ni sestrice
Da se njima potužim*

*Niko ne zna kako mi je
Svud me prati tuga, jad
Lutajući po svijetu
Umrijeću skoro mlad*

As vast as the world
The bright sun shines upon
There is no greater orphan
Than I have become

I've no father, I've no mother
To whom, young, I could lament
Nor a brother nor a sister
To share my sorrow with them

Nobody knows what it's like for me
As I'm shadowed by sorrow and pain
Wandering the world
I will soon die young

As refugees from war or due to economic migration, many Bosnians historically fled the country and found a new life elsewhere. That is a reason many Bosnian tunes are about leaving your home, running away with your lover to a land where you can be together, remembering a mother who you left behind. This old *sevdah* standard tells the story about the loneliness emigrants often feel. It was famously sung by my grandfather Zaim Imamović.



Sarajevo at the end of 19th Century
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The valley opened itself up below me, the hillsides already trying out the colors for the sunset hour. I heard someone call my name—a voice deep and soft, pronouncing the soft consonants in my name as someone from Sarajevo would—but when I turned around, there was no one there, the place as empty as can be. And then the voice was singing that old Bosnian song, “*Bejturan se uz ružu savija.*” It was not Rahela’s voice. The voice was male and warm, it sang hummily, mumbling the words, as if the mouth was close to my ear. *Bejturan se uz ružu savija, vilu ljubi Đerzelez Alija, Vilu ljubi svu noć na konaku, po mjesecu i mutnu oblaku.*

—*The World and All That It Holds,*
Aleksandar Hemon

THE MUSIC WITHIN

By Aleksandar Hemon

Some time around the peak of the pandemic, I called my friend Damir Imamović and told him about the novel I was writing. I had started working on the book before 2010 but the writing accelerated rapidly in the torrid months of the isolation. The novel starts in 1914, on the day the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot in Sarajevo and World War One effectively commenced, and it is about two Bosnian men—Pinto, a Sephardic Jew and, Osman, a Muslim. Their love survives wars, atrocities, and revolutions as the lovers journey over the years from Sarajevo to Shanghai (but not back). Along the way, regardless of dangers and despair they encounter, they sing to each other. Pinto sings Sephardic songs in Ladino (or Spanjol, as it was called in Bosnia), while Osman sings *sevdah* back to

him—though the difference between the two musical idioms is negligible in more ways than one. I had already inserted some songs in the novel and they became a crucial element of my characters' relationship, but I needed more—I needed the music from the novel to be heard in the world.

What I suggested to Damir was that he record an album featuring those songs and also write some more music inspired by Pinto and Osman's love. Damir instantly agreed, and over the following months I sent him chapters as I was producing them. We kept talking about the story and how and what songs could be integrated in the novel. Damir tracked down some songs that could fit well into the novel, so I inserted them in subsequent revisions.

He also wrote a couple of songs that contained and conveyed the emotions generated in and by my novel, which in due course acquired its title, *The World and All That It Holds*. Our plan was that the music be both the soundtrack for *The World and All That It Holds* and an album unto itself, two sovereign works of art working together and allowing for an experience that is more than the sum of the two.

It was always obvious to me that Damir was the perfect artist to collaborate with. He is a superb musician, belonging to a dynasty of *sevdah* singers—both his father Nedžad and grandfather Zaim had sustained and expanded the already rich, centuries-long tradition. For his part, Damir uncovered the rich vein of

sevdah rooted in the lived experience of same-sex love, which was encoded in such a way that the songs could be interpreted in more ways than one. My book is about an everlasting love between two men, who journey through the world of war and suffering with the wind of longing in their tattered sails. In a perpetually crumbling world, all they have is love and the songs that contain that love. Even if my characters somehow happened not to be Bosnian, *sevdah*, including its Sephardic kin, would've been a perfect soundtrack for their journey.

I've always thought that *sevdah* is one of those things that is hard to define but is instantly recognizable, and not only to Bosnians, for whom it might be a second nature. I find it useful and productive to think of *sevdah* as not just a musical form

(*sevdalinka*) marked by a slow or moderate tempo and minor modes, traditionally sung by women in social situations. *Sevdah* is more than a mere genre of traditional music; it is an outlook, a way of being in the world that is not easily translatable or performable. I would venture to say that the primary feeling of *sevdah* is longing for what might not be attainable, because of patriarchal oppression, or because life passes at great speed and irreversibly. Songs of *sevdah* are full of longing for a lover who is now dead or, worse, will be married to someone else for the rest of his/her sorrowful life; for a hometown to which one can no longer return; for the lost joy of distant youth, including a brief moment of love, conveyed by a mere glance; for a life different from this one, which can only be imagined but never lived; for a peaceful

death, or some kind of release from the present suffering. Life, love, and longing are indeed much the same thing wherever *sevdah* is at home. But this longing is never defeating, never incapacitating, for that which is not available is now invested in the song that is to be sung with and for other people, which allows for an evanescent moment of pleasure shared in music, and sometimes even outright joy. A song becomes an evanescent domain of imaginable freedom, a place where the subject has agency to convert the soul pain into the pleasure of singing. *Sevdah* is not sad music—just as blues or *fado* are not reducible to sorrow—but a means to convert the longing for what is absent into the celebration of what is present, even—particularly—if the song is all we have at this moment. For a diasporic people—and

Bosnians are one—the song is the lightest and most valuable baggage, something that can be carried and is hard to lose.

The music of the Bosnian Sephardim is greatly overlapping with *sevdah*, not only because quite a few Sephardic songs were absorbed into it, but also because the songs brought centuries before to Bosnia from Espanja (Spain) indelibly featured scales and modes of the Middle East, which found their ways to Bosnia by way of the Ottoman conquest. More importantly, perhaps, the Sephardic music is marked by unassuageable diasporic yearning for what is forever out of reach.

Sephardic music was built into the novel from the very beginning, not least because I was listening to the great Flory Jagoda for

as long as I had been writing the book. The Jewish community in Bosnia and Sarajevo was annihilated in the Shoah, and now only a handful of elderly Spanjol speakers live there. The novel, and Damir's music, revisit the time when a diasporic people and their incredibly rich culture were an integral part of everything Bosnian.

When Pinto sings “Anderleto,” “Madre mia si mi muero,” or “Nočes, nočes” to Osman, what is communicated is not only love but also the same kind of kinship and affinity shared among Bosnian friends and neighbors. Similarly, when Osman sings “Snijeg pade na behar na voće” or “Bejturan,” the range of ideas and emotions is entirely intelligible to Pinto. That is because music always provides a path to an experience that can and indeed must

be shared, allows for the temporary dissolution of the parochial self, and for becoming (temporarily) someone else, someone perhaps more loved and loving. Music is not a universal language, but it offers a utopian possibility of everyone experiencing at the same time. It is because of music that a universal language becomes imaginable, even if forever unattainable.

In my novel, I wanted to explore the way love works under extreme duress. The world in which Osman and Pinto are trying to survive is perpetually coming apart, and the question is whether love makes any sense in such circumstances. On their way from Sarajevo to Shanghai, our heroes have nothing but each other and the music—they might lose each other but

will never lose the music. Damir's album contains the music they will never lose and the love that is simultaneously indelible and impossible.

Damir is the bard of the kind of yearning that comes with such love. He infuses his music with the combination of longing and being intensely present in the world (which is what love can do for people even in the hardest circumstances), with an admixture of sorrow and joy where the two feelings enhance, rather than cancel, each other. His interpretations of traditional songs are not mere curated reproductions of the musical idiom, but instead look for a way to make it original and surprising. Some of the songs on this album I have known my entire life, and yet I have not really heard them until I heard Damir, and now

I cannot hear the previous version except in comparison to Damir's interpretation. One of the many beautiful consequences of our collaboration is that the novel and the people in it now glow in the light of the music, while the music has acquired an additional, narrative dimension. I cannot imagine my own novel existing without Damir's music. The very existence of this album expands the boundaries of my novel, and as literature as such. I can only hope that my book does the same for the music. And I hope that you will find a way to listen to Damir Imamović's glorious music while reading my novel. Love survives everything, but it also has a sound.



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